

HOW SHALL WE SING THE LORD'S SONG IN A STRANGE LAND
Ps. 137:1-6; Jn.8:32; Jn.14:6

Let me begin with a poem, one of the oldest poems in the world:
Psalm 137.

By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion... Our captors...said, 'Sing us a song of [Zion]. How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land? If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let...my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth...

"If I forget thee, O Jerusalem..." It's a sad poem, 2,500 years old. But it is new every year in this troubled world. It's the song of the captives, the refugees, the marginalized, the hopelessly homesick. And in a small way, it's the song of anyone who leaves home for a strange land. Like you. Like me.

Well, I don't really know about you. But I wasn't happy the first time I came to America. I wasn't born here. I was born in Korea, in what is now North Korea. When I was five years old my parents came home for a year on furlough. They were coming home, but it wasn't home for me. When we pulled into the dock in San Francisco, we were standing at the rail watching the people on the dock, and my 4-year old brother, said, "Papa, look at all those foreigners." We were still thinking Korean. And that first year in an American school was a most unhappy experience. We were miserable. We were speaking a mixture of Korean and English, and first graders can be very cruel. They made fun of us. "You're not Americans", they said. And we were trying so hard to become Americans.

If this is a first year for you here as an international student, there are times when Americans may make you feel just as uncomfortable--almost perhaps as lost and homesick as those Jewish exiles in cruel Babylon. "How

can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?"

If you ever begin to feel that way, remember Daniel, and his fellow exiles, Shadrack, Meshack and Abednego. If there come times when you think Princeton is hard. How about a lion's den, and a fiery furnace? If they could "sing the Lord's song" there, why can't you do it here. Let me give you a piece of good news: however homesick, and overloaded, and uncomfortable you may be here at times, and however badly you think at times that we are mistreating you, and don't understand you--Princeton is not a lion's den; it's not a fiery furnace, and President Thomas Gillespie is not a Nebuchadnezzar.

However, the best way for you to sing the Lord's song in this strange land, is to move with your Old Testament into the New Testament. Some commentators say that the fourth man in that fiery furnace was Jesus. That's guess work, of course, not exegesis. The incarnation did not occur in Babylon, it happened in Bethlehem.

And it was in Bethlehem that the angels sang, singing the Lord's song in a strange land--for that was what Judaea was then, occupied territory, a land no longer Jewish, a land misruled by a wicked, puppet king, Herod, in Jerusalem, and a cruel, conquering emperor in Rome. What was there to sing about? A baby?. A helpless baby, and two frightened parents, and no room for them in the inn. Within a few weeks they had to pick the baby up and flee for their lives to Egypt, a land they knew all too well as a hard land where their ancestors had once been slaves. From occupation to exile and slavery all over again? "How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?"

But the angels sang, and we still sing with them, "Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth..." For there is no more captivity for Christians. We are free. Jesus said, You shall know the truth, and the truth

shall make you free" (John 8:32). He said, "I am the truth" (John 14:6). I make you free. And I am with you always; and if you are with me you are not in a strange land for no land is strange to me. No one is a foreigner to me. I am in you, and you are in me. And as for "peace on earth"... Well, I died for it. Now, what now are you going to do about it?

But that's another sermon. It begins: "Forget Jerusalem... You can sing the Lord's song anywhere." No, that's not quite what I mean. You don't need to forget your beloved Jerusalems. But don't let memory trick you into thinking that any of them were or are perfect. Don't let your dreams about a home you have left, keep you from doing what you need to do now in this strange, sometimes uncomfortable land you are actually in.

All that Jesus promises is that in whatsoever place God has put you, you can still "sing the Lord's song in a strange land".

I remember a sermon by one of the greatest Christians Korea ever had, Dr. Han Kyung Chik. One Sunday he stopped the congregation in the middle of a hymn. He said, "You're not all singing. Don't you know that the Christian faith is the only religion in the world that sings its faith. So sing!" And after he had them singing, he went on to preach about singing the faith.

So don't dream about past Jerusalems. Finish your work here, study hard, pass your examinations. Then go out singing into this hard and troublesome world with some music to make them listen to the text.

Half of all the world's people go to bed hungry every night. Feeding the hungry is a Christian mission. So sing while you feed them.

Most of the world's people are sick and in pain. Healing is a Christian mission. So sing while you feed them.

Half of all the world's people cannot read and write. Literacy and Bible translation are Christian missions. So sing while you teach.

More than half of all the world's people suffer from injustice and oppression. The never-ending struggle for human rights is a Christian mission. So sing when you demand justice.

And if all this is not enough mission for you 21st century Christians--the struggle against human hunger, ignorance, suffering, poverty injustice and peace--what more can I say? Well, there is one more thing that I must say. You can do all that in mission, and still fail in our Christian mission. You can do all that and leave the deepest need of the human heart unmet. Two-thirds of the world's people, after 2000 years, still do not know and believe that Jesus Christ is the only Lord and Saviour. So go out and sing when you tell them the good news.

"How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land? You can do it. You are Christians!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
AMEN.

- Samuel Hugh Moffett

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Let me begin with a poem, one of the oldest poems in the world: ^{Ps. 137.}

By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion... Our captors...said, 'Sing us a song of [Zion]. How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? [^] If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let...my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth...

"If I forget thee, O Jerusalem..." It's a sad poem, ^{Ps. 137,} 2,500 years old. But it is new every year in this troubled world. It's the song of the captives, the refugees, the marginalized, the hopelessly homesick. And in a small way, it's the song of anyone who leaves home for a strange land. Like you. Like me.

^{Well,} I don't really know about you. But I wasn't happy the first time I came to America. I wasn't born here. I was born in Korea, ~~in the north~~, in what is now North Korea, ~~and~~ ^{and} when I was five years old my parents came home on furlough. They were coming home, but it wasn't home for me. When we pulled into the dock in San Francisco, we were standing at the rail watching the people on the dock, and my 4-year old brother, said, "Papa, look at all those foreigners." ^{We were still} ~~He~~ ^{was} thinking Korean. And that first year in an American school was ^a most unhappy ^{experience.} We were miserable. We were speaking a mixture of Korean and English, and first graders can be very cruel. They made fun of us. "You're not Americans", they said. And we were trying so hard to become Americans.

> ~~And~~ ^{if} this is a first year for you here as an international student, there are times when Americans ^{will} make you feel just as uncomfortable--~~just~~ ^{almost perhaps} as

lost and ^{homesick} miserable as those Jewish exiles in cruel Babylon. ~~And homesick.~~

"How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?"

If ^{you begin to feel that way,} so, remember Daniel, and ^{remember} his friends Shadrack, Meshack and Abednego. If there come times when you think Princeton is hard. How about a lion's den, and a fiery furnace? If they could "sing the Lord's song" there, why can't you do it here. Let me give you a piece of good news: however homesick, and overloaded, and uncomfortable you may be here at times, and however badly you think at times that we are mistreating you, ^{we don't understand you -} Princeton is not a lion's den, or a fiery furnace, and President Thomas Gillespie is not a Neubchadnezzar.

The best way for you, however, to sing the Lord's song in this strange land, is to move with your Old Testament into the New Testament. Some commentators say that the fourth man in that fiery furnace was Jesus. That's guess work, ~~of course~~, not exegesis. The incarnation did not occur in Babylon; ^{if happened} but in Bethlehem..

And it was in Bethlehem that the angels sang, singing the Lord's song in a strange land, ^{for that was what Judaea was} ~~singing in~~ occupied territory, a land no longer Jewish, a land misruled by a wicked, puppet king, Herod, in Jerusalem, and a cruel, conquering emperor in Rome. What was there to sing about? A baby?. A helpless baby, and ~~his~~ ^{and there was no room for them in the inn. Within a few weeks they had to} two frightened parents who ~~picked~~ ^{a hard land} him up and fled for their lives to Egypt, a land they knew all too well as ~~the empire~~ where their ancestors had once been slaves. From occupation to exile and slavery all over again? "How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?"

But the angels sang, and we still sing ~~it~~ with them, "Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth..." For there is no more captivity for Christians. We are free. Jesus said, ["] You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32). He said, "I am the truth" (John 14:6). I

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But that's another sermon. It begins: "Forget Jerusalem..." No, ^{you can sing the Lord's song anywhere.} that's not quite what I mean. You don't need to forget your beloved Jerusalems. But don't let memory trick you into thinking that any of them were or are perfect. Don't let your dreams about a home you have left, keep you from doing what you need to do now in this strange, sometimes uncomfortable land you are actually in.

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Half of the world's people go to bed hungry every night. ^{Is that the mission?} Some of them right here in Atlanta - but most of them in Asia & Africa. Americans feed their dogs better than half the world can feed itself. ^{So sing, when you feed the world.} Feeding the world is a Christian mission.

Most of the world's people are sick and in pain. ^{So sing while you heal.} Healing is a Christian mission. When Zaire received its independence in 1960 there was not a single doctor in the whole country. (J.H. Kane, Understanding Christian Mission, rev. p. 312). Yet when Jesus first sent out his disciples in mission, he told them, "preach the kingdom of God and...heal the sick." (Lk. 9:2).

Half of all the world's people cannot read. Literacy and Bible translation ^{are} ~~of~~ Christian missions. ^{So sing while you teach.} The mind learns through the eye more than through any other sense transmission process. "Go ye therefore and make disciples: of all nations... teaching them..." said Jesus. (Matt 28:14, 20).

More than half of the world's people suffer from injustice and oppression. The never-ending struggle for human rights, both individual and collective, is a Christian mission. ^{So sing when you demand justice.} "The Lord... executes justice for the oppressed; [He] sets the prisoner free [and] lifts up those who are bowed down", says the Psalmist (Ps. 146).

The whole world today, they tell us, teeters on the brink of instant total and unprecedented physical destruction. The making of peace in a warring world is a Christian mission. "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God", said Jesus (Matt. 5:9).

If all this is not enough mission for 20th century Christians--the struggle against human hunger, ignorance, suffering, poverty, injustice and war--what more can I say? Well, there is one thing I must say. You can do all this in mission, and still fail in the Christian mission. You can do all this, and leave the deepest need of the human heart unmet. Two-thirds of the world's people, after two thousand years, still do not know and believe the good news that Jesus Christ is Lord and Saviour. ^{the only} ^{So sing when you tell them the good news.} "What shall it profit them," said Jesus, "if they gain the whole world and lose [their] own soul[s]." (Mt.16:26)

Put very simply, the Christian world mission in this 20th century is to break through any barrier that separates any part of the world from Jesus Christ to tell the good news about Him in every possible way, to anyone who will listen. As Jesus used to say, "He that hath ears to hear, let him hear".

● Charles W. Bryan, Foreign Mission Board senior vice president for overseas operations: "World population, standing at above 4.5 billion, has more lost people than lived on earth in the year 1900. If this trend continues, the increase to the year 2000 will exceed the population living on earth as recently as 1980."

- Samuel Hugh Moffett
Princeton, N.J.

*How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?
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In the name of the Father*

- The Commission
April 1983, p. 6

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

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Just yesterday, a pastor told about meeting someone who had seen a new bumper-sticker. It said, "Jesus is coming again. Look busy".

Of course, it was meant to be a tricky little way to say, "Christians, stop talking and get busy."